The Behavior Analyst 1986, 9, 211–218 No. 2 (Fall)

Book Review

Crime and Human Nature: A Psychology of Criminality

Michael T. Nietzel and Richard Milich
University of Kentucky

The publication of James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein's *Crime and Human Nature* (Simon & Schuster, 1985) has proven to be a major event for criminologists as well as other scholars, professionals, politicians, and those members of the lay public interested in understanding the causes of crime. Seldom does a book written by two academicians generate the interest and spark the debate that this one has. Network news, the talk-show circuit, and countless newspaper articles have analyzed the book with varying degrees of accuracy in their summaries of its content. By the end of February, 1986, we were able to identify more than 20 major periodicals or collections of criticism that had reviewed the book, including such notable outlets as *Time, Newsweek, New York Times Book Review, The New Republic,* and *Science.* Now *The Behavior Analyst* has joined this group, and the book's monumentality has been assured.

There is a danger in this much attention, and that is that the book will be read about rather than read itself. This temptation is strengthened by the intimidating size (639 pages), encyclopedic coverage, and occasionally ponderous prose of the book. Unless the reader is a criminologist, a book reviewer, or a compulsive graduate student with this book required on a reading list, it will take dedication to read the book in its entirety. One's resolve to tackle this Herculean task may be weakened by the availability of so many secondary synopses of the book often preceded by the reviewer's warnings that the prose is "dry as dust," that the book will leave you "bleary-eyed," or that much of it "makes depressing reading." An even greater threat to adequate understanding of the book is the tendency to reduce its themes to shop-worn slogans or forced positions on simplistic dichotomies. As examples, one encounters such distortions as *Time*'s headline, "Are Criminals Born, Not Made?" as well as *Newsweek*'s more declarative, "Criminals Born and Bred." Nor are such phrases confined to the popular press; in fact, for good old-fashioned *ad hominem* invective, gratuitousness, and sophistry, fellow academicians are hard to beat. Witness Leon Kamin's review in *Scientific American* (February, 1986). His dismissal of the book as "selective use of poor data to support a muddled ideology . . . ," his intimation that social phenomena cannot be genetically influenced, his characterization of a psychological experiment as a "silly game forced (on the subjects) by psychologists," and his suggestion that ideas like Wilson and Herrnstein's are to be expected whenever we have someone like Ronald Reagan for President reveal more about Kamin than *Crime and Human Nature.*

The repeated descriptions of the book as a predominantly hereditarian account of criminality mislead the nonreader or even the casual "skimmer" to summarize it as a naturist theory of crime. It is not. Wilson and Herrnstein attempt to restore psychological factors, family variables, and individual predispositions (some of which are inheritable and some of which are not) to a place of importance

---

The complete citation is Wilson, J. Q., & Herrnstein, R. J. *Crime and human nature.* New York: Simon and Schuster ($22.95). Requests for reprints should be sent to the first author, Department of Psychology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506.

in criminological theory, which has for at least three decades been dominated by sociological explanations. Their attempt to balance the scales between sociological and constitutional-psychological theories of criminality does not mean that they place all the weight on individual difference variables. A careful reading of *Crime and Human Nature* is the most effective antidote to hasty and faulty categorization of its conclusions. Readers will frequently encounter statements like, "many factors cause crime, with no single characteristic either necessary or sufficient to account for it" (p. 162), "the offender offends not just because of immediate needs and circumstances but also because of enduring personal characteristics" (p. 209), and "If one asks whether criminals are born or made, the answer, in one sense, is that they are both and, in a more important sense, that the question is badly phrased" (p. 509).

The reader willing to devote considerable time and serious effort to this book will be richly rewarded. It is a major piece of scholarship not only for the sheer brute force of the research the authors consider (more than 1,000 references) but also for their attempt to forge the data into a theory of criminality that (1) considers the combined effects of constitutional, psychological, familial, and (perhaps) early school influences and that (2) assigns primary importance to these variables and secondary status to sociological variables (e.g., unemployment and social class, which may exert their strongest effects on "late-blooming" offenders). Not all components of their account are equally compelling, as we suggest later. And not all of the research they rely on is critically analyzed with equivalent incisiveness, another problem we address later. These objections, however, do not significantly dampen our overall impression of the book—it is one of the best documented, most provocative studies of serious criminality ever written.

The authors bring impressive credentials to this collaborative effort which began in 1977 when they co-taught a graduate course on crime and criminal justice at Harvard and a year later offered a similar seminar at the undergraduate level. James Wilson, a political scientist by training, is well known in criminological circles for his *Thinking About Crime* (1975; revised in 1983). Several of the themes in *Crime and Human Nature,* such as the role of family discipline and warmth in teaching children self-control, and the growing "ethos of self-expression" in America which hinders institutional control of impulses, were previously presented in the *Thinking About Crime* volumes. Richard Herrnstein, the psychologist, should be familiar to behavior theorists for his studies of avoidance learning and the law of effect. He is probably better known among lay readers, however, for his role in the controversy over the heritability of intelligence that raged in the 1970s (e.g., *IQ in the Meritocracy,* 1973).

Crime and Human Nature consists of 20 chapters organized into six major sections. The first chapter describes and evaluates available methods for measuring crime (police reports, victim surveys, self-reports, arrest records, observation, and vital statistics) and distinguishes between incidence and prevalence data. The authors also use this first chapter to delimit their field of inquiry to what they call *criminality*—serious crimes, condemned and punished in all societies, involving predatory, aggressive, or larcenous behavior. For this reason, their theory may not adequately explain the full range of illegal conduct. As a further result of this definition, Wilson and Herrnstein begin their analyses by focusing on crimes that show regularity on the three variables of age, sex, and place; "crime is an activity disproportionately carried out by young men living in large cities" (p. 26). Beyond these initial regularities, other patterns of criminality are apparent, and it is these patterns that Wilson and Herrnstein contend will predispose individuals to criminality.

Their theory of criminality is summarized in Chapter two and presented mathematically in an appendix. It integrates two of American psychology's most mainstream traditions—behavior learning theory and individual differences. The

learning theory component begins with the operant principle that behavior is determined by its consequences. Both criminal and noncriminal behavior have gains and losses. For example, the gains associated with not committing a crime include having a clear conscience, avoiding punishment, and maintaining one's reputation. The gains associated with criminal behavior include monetary factors, revenge, or peer approval. Whether a crime is committed depends, in part, on the net ratio of these gains and losses for both criminal and noncriminal behavior. When the ratio for committing a crime exceeds that for not doing so, there is an increased likelihood of such a crime being committed.

Although this initial aspect of the theory is quite straightforward and consistent with classical operant principles, Wilson and Herrnstein argue that individual differences also influence these ratios and help determine whether a given individual is likely to commit criminal behavior. These differences, discussed at length in subsequent chapters, affect both respondent and operant processes. For example, relying on Eysenck, the authors propose that individuals differ in the ease with which they learn to associate, through respondent conditioning, negative emotional states (e.g., anxiety) with proscribed behaviors, and positive emotional states (e.g., self-satisfaction) with prescribed behaviors. These respondently conditioned responses are what Eysenck equates with conscience. According to Wilson and Herrnstein, a strong conscience operates to increase the gains associated with noncriminal behavior and to increase the losses associated with criminal behavior.

Another differentiating personality factor relates to the concept of impulsivity or time discounting. Although all reinforcers lose strength the more remote they are from the behavior, individuals differ in delaying gratification and thereby obtaining reinforcement from potential long-term gains. More impulsive individuals, as defined by Wilson and Herrnstein, have greater difficulty in deriving benefit from distant, albeit potentially powerful, consequences. This concept of impulsivity or time discounting is important in understanding criminal behavior, since the gains associated with crime (e.g., large amount of money and revenge) tend to occur relatively immediately, whereas the losses associated with such behavior (e.g., punishment and loss of reputation if detected) usually occur much later in time, if they occur at all. Thus, for impulsive individuals the ratios of gains and losses may be shifted in the direction of criminal behavior.

The authors also discuss equity, a concept borrowed from social psychology, as an important influence on criminality. Equity theory states that people constantly make comparisons between what they feel they deserve and what they observe other individuals receiving. Inequitable transactions are ones in which one's own ratio of gains to costs is less than that of others. The important point in terms of the present theory is that individuals differ in how they respond to inequitable relationships. Further, these judgments of equity may influence the perception of the reinforcing value of crime. For example, if one perceives oneself as being unfairly deprived by society, this sense of inequity can increase the gains associated with criminal behavior (e.g., stealing), since such behavior will help to restore one's sense of equity.

The second and more controversial component of their theory is what Wilson and Herrnstein call "constitutional factors" by which they mean factors, present at birth or soon after, whose behavioral consequences gradually appear during development. These factors are discussed in five chapters dealing separately with the topics of somatotyping of criminals and genetic transmission, gender, age, intelligence, and personality.

The chapter on genetics and the anatomical correlates of criminality reviews the standard primary sources—Lombroso, Sheldon, Hooten, and the Gluecks on somatotyping and Lange, Christiansen, and Mednick on twin and adoption studies of genetic influence. Wilson and Herrnstein are unusually tolerant of the methodological deficiencies in the so-

matotyping research, a generosity that we found peculiar for two reasons, First, physique plays only a peripheral role in their own theory. Second, their willingness to excuse methodological blunders in this research is in such contrast to the exacting standards they exercise in examining the research on such sociological factors as peer influences or unemployment. Their treatment of the research on genetics is more trustworthy, although their concern with the XYY issue seems to be much ado about nearly nothing. From genetic research, they conclude that certain inherited predispositions (traces of which may be reflected in the mesomorphic bodies thought to prevail among criminals) make some persons more likely to behave criminally when confronted with "activating events" that occur in their families, schools, or communities.

One such predisposition is gender (Chapter 4). Males, we are told, are anywhere from five to 50 times more likely to be arrested as females, a finding that Wilson and Herrnstein conclude is due to biological differences in aggression and other primary drives that influence enactment of different sex roles. Chapter five's topic, age, while not strictly a constitutional factor, is correlated with physical growth, cognitive development, and changes in the meaning and availability of certain reinforcers that conspire to make the juvenile years the peak offending period of life. Thereafter, crime rates decline either because older persons commit fewer crimes, or because a large percentage of younger persons commit a few offenses and then stop, or both.

Chapters six and seven discuss what Wilson and Herrnstein regard as the crucial predispositions of intelligence and personality, which they estimate to be between 50–80% and between 30–60% inheritable, respectively. Criminals show an IQ deficiency of approximately 10 points from noncriminals, a difference accounted for largely by decrements in verbal rather than performance scores. Wilson and Herrnstein argue that borderline or low intelligence can predispose a person to criminality in a number of ways: it makes it harder to delay gratification and to focus on the long-range consequences of crime, it lowers the quality of moral reasoning, and it leads to failure in important areas of life (work and school) that "enhances the rewards for crime by engendering feelings of unfairness" (p. 171). With respect to personality, we have already discussed some of the dimensions that Wilson and Herrnstein believe are more characteristic of the criminal. These differences converge on the construct of psychopathy. Criminals are more likely to show elevations on the psychopathy, schizophrenia, and hypomania scales of the MMPI and the socialization, responsibility, and self-control scales of the CPI. They show tendencies toward chronic underarousal, poorer conditionability, greater impulsivity, and less anxiety. As a result of these deviations, a person is less deterred from crime by aversive consequences and more attracted to wrongdoing.

Chapters eight, nine, and ten discuss the role of developmental influences within the family and the school, which can "moderate or magnify" any natural dispositions. Families that foster (1) *attachment* of their children to their parents, (2) *longer time horizons* by which children consider the distant consequences of current actions, and (3) strong *consciences* that internally constrain misbehavior will help counteract criminal predispositions. The primary child-rearing methods for inculcating these three qualities involve a combination of warm supportiveness with consistent enforcement of clear rules. Unfortunately, these methods are least likely to be practiced by parents whose own traits reflect the predispositions they have passed to their children. Therefore, children may suffer the double whammy of having problematic predispositions compounded by adverse forms of parental control.

Of some, but lesser importance, is the interaction between constitutional deficits and early experiences in school. Impulsive, unsocialized personalities and lower intelligence not only directly make criminality more likely, their interactions with cold, permissive schools that do not

improve educational attainment may be additionally criminogenic.

The next four chapters are concerned with what Wilson and Herrnstein term the "social context" of crime—aspects of community life (including peer influences, neighborhood boundaries, and opportunities for crime), unemployment, media violence, and the use of alcohol and heroin. Although each of these factors is accorded some influence on crime, Wilson and Herrnstein attribute relatively minor importance to all of them in comparison to personal traits, family socialization and early school experience. What effects they do have are usually seen as redundant with earlier constitutional determinants (a relationship that the authors classify as "common causes") or, as is the case with alcohol, due to exacerbation of the personal traits of impulsiveness, time discounting and aggressiveness.

The final chapter of the "social context" section reclassifies three recognized policies for modifying crime rates—deterrence through punishment, enlarged opportunities for rewarding noncriminal conduct, and rehabilitation of individuals—into the two categories of "changing subjective states" and "changing contingencies." Even though Wilson and Herrnstein later acknowledge the interrelatedness of these two methods, they argue that changing subjective states does not work very well—changing contingencies does better. They believe that the most powerful contingencies are available in families rather than in the labor market or neighborhood, a theme that echoes earlier chapters and portends later ones. In addition, Wilson and Herrnstein suggest that the swiftness, severity, and certainty of society's punishment of criminals affect their subsequent behavior, although this conclusion seems to apply best to offenders (e.g., drunk drivers and nonchronic offenders) who are quite different from the criminals Wilson and Herrnstein tell us in Chapter one they are most interested in.

A "History and Culture" section addresses the question of historical trends in crime rates (Chapter 16), cultural and national variations in crime (Chapter 17), and racial differences and crime (Chapter 18). Much of this material is more speculative than the treatment of constitutional and developmental influences as other reviewers have been quick to observe. Some of it, notably their contention that society's institutions for controlling impulsive behavior have weakened in the latter half of the 20th century and that this change contributes to rising crime rates, has been criticized for being too "value laden" (Bruck, 1986). Other parts, for example their conclusion that there is not enough evidence to decide on any one explanation for high crime rates among blacks, have been portrayed as being "dainty with [a] hot potato" (Gewen, 1985). Here again, whether one reads Wilson and Herrnstein or reads their reviewers will leave very different impressions.

Wilson and Herrnstein point to three influences that they believe account for historical and national trends in crime rates: (1) increases in the proportion of young males in a population, (2) changes in the ratio of benefits to costs for criminality, and (3) broad changes in society's commitment to instilling self-control via the family, schools, and special institutions like the church. The possibility that individual differences can still account for some international differences in crime rates is considered, albeit very tentatively in Chapter seventeen, by contrasting the Japanese with people from other countries. Their analysis of race differences in crime rates is cautious; it considers the possibility that constitutional factors play a role, but only as they are embedded in a "continuing tangle" of social, economic, and cultural-familial causes.

The final two chapters of the book examine the implications of Wilson and Herrnstein's theory for the appropriateness of punishment of criminals and for alternative views of human nature and the social policies derived from these views. On the matter of punishment, they acknowledge the utilitation purposes of punishment (deterrence, moral education, and incapacitation), but base the ultimate justification for it on the grounds

of retribution and the concept of just desserts. Punishment is just when it restores society's sense of equity by requiring criminals to pay a debt that cancels the unfair advantage their crime produced. Conditions that might affect judgments about when punishment is deserved (e.g., insanity and social hardships) are discussed in a manner that preserves the moral necessity of punishment. On the different views of human nature, Wilson and Herrnstein contrast the Hobbesian "man as calculator" model with the Rousseauian "man as innocent" ideal and not surprisingly reject them both (Rousseau a little more vigorously) in favor of an Aristotelian "man as social animal" formulation in which the family is seen as the crucial bender of important criminological twigs. In addition to again asserting the centrality of family processes in the formation of human character, the authors use this last chapter to call for social practices that reaffirm personal responsibility, that uphold standards of right conduct, and that establish penalties for wrong conduct.

In any book of this scope, reviewers are bound to find some problems and have some complaints. We are no exception. One problem that the authors do not completely resolve is the identification of the audience for whom the book is written. Aspects of the book suggest that it is aimed at criminologists, but the book was clearly intended for the lay reader as well. This is most evident in Chapter two, where the authors suggest that the lay reader skip the more technical aspects of the theory being proposed. The large number of reviews of the book in the popular press, as well as the appearance of the authors on television talk shows, further reinforces the supposition that the book was intended, and is being marketed, for a wider audience than professionals in the field.

Obviously, whenever scholars try to reach such a diverse readership, difficulties are going to arise, and Wilson and Herrnstein are not immune to this problem. The result is a book that may be at times disappointing to both the professional and lay reader. Even the most sophisticated reader is going to experience some difficulty digesting the mass of material presented. Besides its sheer mass, there are other aspects of the book that would overwhelm most lay readers. First, the reader is exposed to competing theories within several different branches of the social sciences, including economics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Even a scientist in one of these fields will have difficulty evaluating theories from other disciplines. It is hard to imagine that the lay reader will be anything but overwhelmed by these diverse theories from disparate disciplines.

An additional problem facing the lay reader is evaluating the authors' critiques of these various theories and the research associated with them. To comprehend the points the authors are making, it is helpful if the reader has some familiarity with issues relating to research design. For example, at times Wilson and Herrnstein discuss the differences in the quality of observational, laboratory, and field studies. At other times they contrast the results obtained from twin and adoption studies. They also discuss the various ways that significant relationships can be interpreted in terms of identifying causality, and throughout the book they discuss the issue of statistical control to indicate that certain competing explanations can be ruled out. The reader who is not sophisticated regarding issues in research design is at a disadvantage in comprehending the authors' evaluations of available research. Such a reader is likely to accept at face value the conclusions drawn by the authors, and skip the reviews and critiques of the available research.

The social scientist who reads this book is likely to have different reactions. Someone who is familiar with research in a specific area may find sections of the book superficial in its treatment of these topics. For example, most researchers familiar with research on hyperactivity and conduct disorders would probably take exception to the statement "Most children who have conduct disorders are also hyperactive, and vice versa" (p. 243). Similar superficial summaries of contro-

versial areas can be found. It is understandable that in such a comprehensive review of the research on crime certain areas will receive a somewhat superficial handling. Nevertheless, this does give one pause in attempting to evaluate the authors' summaries of areas with which one has less familiarity.

An additional reaction *that the reader from the behavioral sciences* may have is that, although Wilson and Herrnstein offer an excellent summary of available research, there basically is nothing original about the theory they are proposing. There appears to be widespread acceptance in the behavioral sciences that behavior is a result of the interaction of both constitutional and environmental factors. Similarly, the authors' use of both respondent and operant conditioning models in their theory has a relatively long history in the study of criminal behavior. We were surprised to see scant recognition paid to some psychological theories of criminality with marked similarity to Wilson and Herrnstein's. Most notable here is Feldman's (1977) *Criminal Behavior: A Psychological Analysis,* and to a lesser extent Yochelson and Samenow's narrower and more controversial *The Criminal Personality* (1976).

Although the knowledgeable professional may be somewhat disappointed in occasional superficalities, the scholar, like the lay reader, will also at times feel overwhelmed by the diversity of theories and disciplines covered by the authors. Therefore, the professional reader who does not specialize in the study of crime will at times feel helpless in his or her ability to evaluate the research summarized by the authors.

Another problem that concerns us is the differential tolerance Wilson and Herrnstein show for defining concepts that are either stressed or deemphasized by their theory. For example, they say that the effects of child abuse are poorly understood in part because "there is no settled definition of abuse" (p. 253). With regard to race, they suggest that ethnic identity is "a bit arbitrary" (p. 160), and that this makes analysis of racial differences difficult. Other examples of their exacting standards for the definition of economic concepts could also be given. But what requirements do they impose on a favored concept like impulsivity? One does not find much concern about adequate operationalization let alone construct validity of this term. Is it really harder to classify persons as black or white than it is to judge them impulsive or reflective? Wilson and Herrnstein appear to act as though it were.

We also found their attention to methodological rigor to be selective at times. Some of this problem is no doubt due to the massive amounts of research they summarize, a task sure to dull even the sharpest eye, but that is not the whole story. Their examination of the defects in the literature on TV violence and aggression is incisive and reads like an article for the *Psychological Bulletin.* Their treatment of the somatotyping studies by Sheldon, Gibbens, and the Gluecks is another matter. It sounds like *Psychology Today.* This problem does not invalidate the theory propounded in *Crime and Human Nature,* but it does suggest some infusion of ideology which makes an easy target for critics.

We have one other less substantive complaint with the book. Portions of some chapters are redundant, especially with respect to Wilson and Herrnstein's frequent reliance on such classics as Glueck and Glueck, McCord and McCord, Robins, and West and Farrington. A stronger editorial hand would have been beneficial.

Despite these several and sometimes nontrivial problems, the fact that we remain impressed by the overall quality of this book is testimony to its unique breadth and the authors' ability to synthesize this material into a theoretical framework. *Crime and Human Nature* is now the standard against which psychological formulations of criminality will be measured. Its comprehensiveness suggests that it will remain the standard for years to come.

REFERENCES

Bruck, D. (1986). The great American trouble. *The New Republic,* January 20, 27–32.

Feldman, M. P. (1977). *Criminal behaviour: A psychological analysis.* New York: John Wiley.

Gewen, B. (1985). Shedding light on crime. *The New Leader,* October 21, 15–16.

Herrnstein, R. J. (1973). *IQ in the meritocracy.* Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown.

Kamin, L. J. (1986). Book review of *Crime and Human Nature. Scientific American,* February, 22–27.

Wilson, J. Q. (1975). *Thinking about crime.* New York: Basic Books.

Wilson, J. Q. (1983). *Thinking about crime* (rev. ed.). New York: Basic Books.

Yochelson, S., & Samenow, S. E. (1976). *The criminal personality.* New York: Jason Aronson.